

“Good News for Families”

Jesus’ Family Values

Mark 3:20-35

John Breon

You may wonder whether there’s good news for families in this Scripture. But as we work through it and see it alongside some others, we’ll find the good news. Let’s first get in the scene.

Jesus has been ministering throughout Galilee. Mark tells us that after a series of confrontations with Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, Jesus and his disciples withdrew to the lake. But a large crowd followed them. People came from all over that part of the world, gathering around Jesus and pushing forward to touch him.

Jesus finally got away for a while, going up on a mountain. There he called some people to himself. They came to him and he appointed twelve of them to be apostles.

In the passage we’ve read, Jesus is back in Capernaum. Again, a crowd gathers around him. He and his disciples are so busy with the crowd—teaching, healing, serving—that they aren’t even able to eat.

We’re talking about a culture where eating is a ritual and food is scarce. For someone not to eat is strange. Perhaps some well-meaning friends get word to Jesus’ family: “Not only is he doing and saying all these strange things, not only does he have crowds swarming around him, but now he’s not eating. He hasn’t sat down to a decent meal in days.”

So Jesus’ family comes to take charge of him. They apparently want to take him home to Nazareth, get him to rest, to calm down, to eat, to stop stirring up all these crowds. They think, “He is out of his mind.”

Jesus’ family misunderstands who he really is. They mistake what he’s saying and doing as madness, rather than the mighty acts of God. Jesus’ family here typifies people who lack faith in and understanding of Jesus.

Now Mark interrupts this story to tell another one. He has a habit of “sandwiching” stories together like this. This story in the middle shows that religious experts assert that God isn’t at work in Jesus, but Satan is. Jesus reacts strongly to this accusation. He says that a kingdom or a house

divided against itself can't stand. We could see a word about families there. He says that all kinds of sins can be forgiven. That's good news! But there is a sin that won't be forgiven. That's the sin of calling the Holy Spirit an unclean spirit, of calling God's works the works of Satan. It's a persistent and final rejection of Jesus. If you're worried about committing that sin, you haven't done it. If you had, you wouldn't care.

Now Mark concludes the story he started in v. 21. When Jesus' family gets to the house where he is, they send someone in through the crowd to call him out. Remember, fearing for his sanity, they want to take him home and put a stop to this nonsense.

Someone tells Jesus, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." Jesus replies, strangely, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then, looking at the people sitting around him—the disciples, but the circle is open to include others—Jesus says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

In Jesus' teaching and actions dealing with families, there are two strands, two categories. Let's look at these two visions of family in Jesus' life and teaching.

On the positive, affirming side, we see Jesus' genealogy, his family tree, in two of the Gospels. We see Mary and Joseph in a positive light as they receive the news that Jesus will be born. When Jesus is young, he is obedient to his parents (Luke 2:51-52). Later he chides the scribes and Pharisees for allowing their tradition to diminish the commandment to honor parents (Matthew 15:1-7; Mark 7:1-13) and he seems to emphasize that commandment in his response to the rich young man (Mt 19:16-29; Mk 10:17-30; Lk 18:18-30). In a previous message, we've already talked about Jesus welcoming and blessing little children. Some of his statements about marriage can seem harsh, but he was calling people back to God's intention in creation and he was actually making things better for women in that culture (Mt 19:1-12; Mk 10: 1-12). In John's Gospel, Jesus answers his mother's request to help with the wedding feast in Cana. And on the cross, Jesus entrusts his mother to the beloved disciple. That shows that on the cross Jesus not only gives himself for us, he also gives us to each other.

That's what we expect from Jesus—the importance and value of family, a model of honor and care for each other. But there's another strand in Jesus' words and actions regarding family. This one is more surprising. It reprioritizes family. In this strand we see family from a different perspective. Our text in Mark is an example. Let's look at this other view of family.

When Jesus calls his first disciples, the brothers James and John leave their father and follow Jesus (Mt 4:22; Mk 1:20). When a would-be disciple offers to follow Jesus, but first wants to bury his father, Jesus says, "Let the dead bury the dead and you follow me" (Mt 8:21; Lk 9:60-61). He's saying that being with him in his mission is more important than a family obligation. And, the man probably wanted to wait for his father's death before he committed to following Jesus. But Jesus emphasizes the urgency of becoming a disciple.

Sometimes Jesus talks about families being divided because of him. In times of persecution, family members would betray each other (Mt 10:21; Mk 13:12; Lk 21:16). Some family members following Jesus and others not would turn them against each other (Mt 10:35-36; Lk 12:53). Then there's that saying of Jesus that we can't love our family more than him (Mt 10:37). In Luke, it's even harder to take. There Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple" (14:26). We need to feel the shock of that before we try to explain it. But we need to realize that Jesus isn't talking about emotions and feelings; he's talking about priorities and choices. Knowing Jesus, following him, sharing his mission is most important. We choose him above all. Our love and devotion for Jesus is so much greater than any other love that the others could almost be considered "hate" by comparison. When we love Jesus above all then we can love others more purely and freely.

Then in this passage in Mark 3 (and its parallels in Mt 12:46-30; Lk 8:19-21), Jesus' family misunderstands him. They try to rein him in. When someone says that his family is outside asking for him, his response is to point to his disciples gathered around him. He says that whoever does the will of God is his family.

Where's the good news for families in this strand of Jesus' teaching? The family is not the most important thing. Family relationships are not the most important ones there are. There's a greater family open to everyone who will come. We don't have to make an idol of our family. The pressure is off as far as the family being the answer to every problem or taking care of everything. We don't have to have perfect families. We don't have to be perfect parents. We already have a perfect Father. We already have a perfect Savior. We have available the Holy Spirit's power to help us in our families and all our relationships. When God is our priority, when we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, we'll have all that we need, including wisdom and grace and power to live in our families the way God intends.

This passage in Mark is mostly about responses to Jesus. We can misunderstand him like his family did. We can reject him like the religious authorities did. But the right response to Jesus is to sit at his feet as disciples—following him and learning from him. That's God's will. Or, we might say that the response Jesus wants is for us to follow him in doing God's will.

And that produces a kinship closer than blood relations. Everyone who follows Jesus, who doesn't reject the Holy Spirit but receives the Spirit through Jesus, is called family by Jesus. The church, the gathering of Jesus' disciples, is the family of God. Jesus is our brother. We are his brothers and sisters. And we are brothers and sisters to each other.